

poll tax while standing in line to vote. And how do some politicians respond? Well, they are trying to make it a crime to give people water and a snack as they wait in lines that are obviously being made longer by their draconian actions.

Think about that. Think about that. They are the ones making the lines longer through these draconian actions. And then they want to make it a crime to bring grandma some water while she is waiting in a line that they are making longer. Make no mistake, this is democracy in reverse. Rather than voters being able to pick the politicians, the politicians are trying to cherry-pick their voters. I say this cannot stand.

And so I rise, Mr. President, because that sacred and noble idea—one person, one vote—is being threatened right now. Politicians in my home State and all across America, in their craven lust for power, have launched a full-fledged assault on voting rights. They are focused on winning at any cost, even the cost of democracy itself. I submit that it is the job of each citizen to stand up for the voting rights of every citizen. And it is the job of this body to do all that it can to defend the viability of our democracy.

That is why I am a proud cosponsor of the For the People Act, which we introduced today. The For the People Act is a major step in the march toward our Democratic ideals, making it easier, not harder, for eligible Americans to vote by instituting common-sense, pro-democracy reforms, like establishing national automatic voter registration for every eligible citizen and allowing all Americans to register to vote online and on election day; requiring States to offer at least 2 weeks of early voting, including weekends, in Federal elections, keeping Souls to the Polls programs alive; prohibiting States from restricting a person's ability to vote absentee or by mail; and preventing States from purging the voting rolls based solely on unreliable evidence like someone's voting history, something we have seen in Georgia and other States in recent years. And it would end the dominance of Big Money in our politics and ensure our public servants are there serving the public.

Amidst these voter suppression laws and tactics, including partisan and racial gerrymandering, and in a system awash in dark money and the dominance of corporate interests and politicians who do their bidding, the voices of the American people have been increasingly drowned out and crowded out and squeezed out of their own democracy. We must pass For the People so that the people might have a voice. Your vote is your voice, and your voice is your human dignity. But not only that, we must pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

You know, voting rights used to be a bipartisan issue. The last time the voting rights bill was reauthorized was 2006. George W. Bush was President,

and it passed this Chamber 98 to 0. But then, in its 2013 decision, the Supreme Court rejected the successful formula for supervision and preclearance contained in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They asked Congress to fix it. That was nearly 8 years ago, and the American people are still waiting. Stripped of protections, voters in States with a long history of voter discrimination and voters in many other States have been thrown to the winds.

We Americans have noisy and spirited debates about many things, and we should. That is what it means to live in a free country. But access to the ballot ought to be nonpartisan. I submit that there should be 100 votes in this Chamber for policies that will make it easier for Americans to make their voices heard in our democracy. Surely, there ought to be at least 60 in this Chamber who believe, as I do, that the four most powerful words uttered in a democracy are "the people have spoken"; therefore, we must ensure that all of the people can speak.

But if not, we must still pass voting rights. The right to vote is preservative of all other rights. It is not just another issue alongside other issues. It is foundational. It is the reason why any of us have the privilege of standing here in the first place. It is about the covenant we have with one another as an American people: "e pluribus unum," out of many, one. It, above all else, must be protected.

So let's be clear. I am not here today to spiral into the procedural argument regarding whether the filibuster in general has merits or has outlived its usefulness. I am here to say that this issue is bigger than the filibuster. I stand before you saying that this issue—access to voting and preempting politicians' efforts to restrict voting—is so fundamental to our democracy that it is too important to be held hostage by a Senate rule, especially one historically used to restrict the expansion of voting rights. It is a contradiction to say we must protect minority rights in the Senate while refusing to protect minority rights in the society. Colleagues, no Senate rule should overrule the integrity of our democracy, and we must find a way to pass voting rights, whether we get rid of the filibuster or not.

So as I close—and nobody believes a preacher when he says "as I close"—let me say that I, as a man of faith, believe that democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea, the sacred worth of all human beings, the notion that we all have within us a spark of the divine, and a right to participate in the shaping of our destiny. Reinhold Niebuhr was right:

[Humanity's] capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but [humanity's] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

John Lewis understood that and was beaten on a bridge defending it. Amelia Boynton, like so many women not mentioned nearly enough, was gassed on that same bridge. A White woman

named Viola Liuzzo was killed. Medgar Evers was murdered in his own driveway. Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, two Jews and an African American, standing up for that sacred idea of democracy, also paid the ultimate price. And we in this body would be stopped and stymied by bipartisan politics? Short-term political gain? Senate procedure? I say let's get this done, no matter what.

I urge my colleagues to pass these two bills, strengthen and lengthen the course of our democracy, secure our credibility as the premier voice for freedom-loving people and democratic movements all over the world, and win the future for all of our children.

I yield the floor.

(Applause.)

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

AGENT ORANGE

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, we can be proud of the bipartisan work the Senate has accomplished in recent years to expand veterans' benefits. Last Congress, we made significant progress with passage of legislation to enhance education, pensions, burial compensation, and landmark improvements to Department of Veterans Affairs care and services for women veterans, in addition to a groundbreaking initiative to prevent veteran suicides.

I am hopeful we can use this momentum to continue turning legislation into law to ensure we fill the promise our country made to the men and women who served in uniform, as well as their families. We know that too many veterans are being left behind because of current VA policies that prohibit them from accessing benefits and healthcare services they have earned.

Veterans like Bill Rhodes of Mena, AR, a marine who served in Thailand during the Vietnam war era, are pleading with Congress to help them get needed medical care and support. After developing illnesses linked to herbicide exposure, Mr. Rhodes turned to the VA for help. His claim was denied. He did his homework. He spent time looking for documentation to support his claim and realized this is a problem that needs a legislative fix because the Department's policies limit benefits for Vietnam war era for Thailand service.

I am proud to join with my colleague and chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Senator TESTER, to introduce legislation to help Mr. Rhodes and veterans like him who were exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides while serving in Thailand during the Vietnam war.

The VA accepts that herbicides were used on fenced-in perimeters of military bases in Thailand, but its current policy is too restrictive. Among other things, it prohibits veterans who worked in security-related specialties. It is reasonable to believe that veterans on Thai bases were exposed to Agent Orange no matter what their jobs were or where their duty stations were.

In an article published in the Dayton Daily News, one veteran who served in Thailand said his barracks were along the perimeter, and at the time of the interview, he still hadn't received benefits for his VA claim.

The arbitrary limits on consideration of a veteran's claim to toxic exposure are simply wrong. These misguided technicalities and bureaucratic hurdles need to be addressed. Our bill would eliminate the unreasonable burden placed on veterans to prove toxic exposure.

No veteran should be denied benefits due to redtape. These Americans who served our country, and to this day are paying a high price as a result, have been carelessly hindered by the current limitations on the presumption of toxic exposure to Agent Orange, but they aren't forgotten. We have an obligation to ensure they get the benefits they are due, and I am committed to supporting their cause.

I appreciate the determination and tireless efforts of Mr. Rhodes. He said this legislation gives him some hope, but he won't be proud of his work until the bill is passed.

I encourage my colleagues to support our legislation. I look forward to working with members of the Senate VA Committee to eliminate the barriers that prevent veterans from getting the care and resources they have earned.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. OSSOFF). The Senator from Oregon.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, the Senate will soon vote on the nomination of California Attorney General Xavier Becerra to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. Moving this nomination forward required an additional procedural step and more floor debate than others, so I will make just a few quick points this afternoon.

First, in our lifetime, America has never faced a greater public health challenge than the pandemic we face today. The Department of Health and Human Services is our point Agency, the leading Agency to coordinate the effort to end the pandemic as soon as possible. Right now, for example, it is coordinating the distribution of vaccines. It is working to get PPE, the critical protective equipment, into the hands of nurses and doctors and all those providers who desperately need more of it. The Department supports rural hospitals to keep them afloat so that rural patients have access to care.

The Department's work includes the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, the National Guard, all 50 States and the District of Columbia, as well as private healthcare systems, doctors, and many individuals across the country.

The American people, we all know, are ready for this pandemic to end. They certainly understand that having a person to coordinate the critical efforts of the Department of Health and

Human Services confirmed and on the job is part of that effort. There simply is no argument for delaying this confirmation any longer.

Attorney General Becerra has the right leadership experience and the right health policy experience to succeed in this critical job. He currently heads the Nation's second largest department of justice. He is in charge of a billion-dollar budget and more than 4,000 employees. He is the top law enforcement official in what would be the fifth largest economy in the world.

In terms of health policy, which is in the area I try to specialize in, I can tell Senators that Xavier Becerra has spent years and years on these issues at the Ways and Means Committee, the key committee in the other body with jurisdiction over healthcare. He has been through major policy debates, including the Affordable Care Act. As California's attorney general, he defended the act in court.

When the pandemic hit, he fought to protect the health and well-being of all Californians, particularly nurses and doctors and those workers who found themselves in harm's way.

Attorney General Becerra has the health policy savvy and the leadership savvy and the experience in both areas to run this Department, no question about it.

Attorney General Becerra made it clear to members of the Finance Committee that he will follow the law. Quaint idea. He said it again and again in response to a barrage of questions. He is going to be accessible to Senators. He is going to work to find common ground on key healthcare issues. I was glad he said it because that is heavy lifting. Most of the time, that is really all you can ask of nominees of the other party.

Healthcare is oftentimes a divisive subject. I think every Senator understands that. It is particularly true when it comes to women's healthcare. But it is clear to me that Attorney General Becerra wants to bring the two sides together. That is a great place to start after the last 4 years of knock-down, drag-out battles over healthcare issues that clearly took America in the wrong direction.

I am going to close with just one thought about why this position is so important. I don't know of any prospect more unifying among Americans than ending the pandemic and getting life back to normal as quickly as possible. Parents want their kids back in school. Grandparents want to hug their grandkids. Everybody wants to feel safe and get out in their communities.

Getting our country to that point is the essence of what this job is all about. Heading the Department of Health and Human Services focuses exactly on those things people want to have the country come together on. But we need to come together to beat the pandemic, and the Department needs its leader confirmed and on the job now.

I was pleased that there was bipartisan support for discharging Attorney General Becerra's nomination from the Finance Committee. I hope the Senate gives his nomination bipartisan support once again when it is time to vote on his confirmation.

I look forward to working with him in the months and years to come.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I oppose the confirmation of California Attorney General Becerra to be the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Our future HHS Secretary will be at the helm of rebuilding our country toward normalcy and preparing to address the weaknesses in our healthcare infrastructure, brought to light by the pandemic. It will be no small task, and its handling will have an impact on America for years to come. It will require a leader at HHS who has the trust of the public and the requisite healthcare experience. Unfortunately, those two factors are missing from the nomination of Attorney General Becerra.

In recovering from a once-in-a-century public health emergency, Americans need to have the confidence that our HHS Secretary understands the intricacies of healthcare policy and has an eye to the future as we improve upon our pre-pandemic vulnerabilities, protecting future generations from experiencing similar pandemic situations.

While Attorney General Becerra served on a healthcare-focused subcommittee as a U.S. Representative, he has no further experience in public health or medicine. He also lacks the executive experience that would be useful in running a complex executive branch Department like HHS, which is involved in the nationwide vaccine rollout and now the regulatory implementation of the recent \$1.9 trillion package.

The American people need to trust that their HHS Secretary will work for them, regardless of disagreements over ideology. Like a President, Cabinet officials work for the entire country, and broad public trust is essential. As Mr. Becerra was serving in his current role in California as attorney general, the Trump administration was making significant regulatory changes to protect the sanctity of life. Attorney General Becerra then spent much of his time attempting to overturn or ignore those changes.

Most recently, Attorney General Becerra actively defended a California law requiring abortion coverage in insurance plans offered by churches. The Office of Civil Rights at HHS ruled on January 24, 2020, that the State's abortion mandate violated Federal law, but Attorney General Becerra refused to comply.

Ideological or moral disagreements should not be met with legal challenges. Americans need to know that